

They Talk of Days for Which They Sit and Wait: Abbas, Netanyahu, and the Abandonment of  
Moderation in Modern Israeli-Palestinian Relations

Research Thesis

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by

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## Introduction

2016 was perhaps one of the most divisive years in recent memory. From the elections that saw the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, to the vote to begin the exit of Britain from the European Union, to the rise of rightwing nationalist groups throughout the world generally and in the West specifically, we have witnessed a clear political polarization of democratic society.<sup>1</sup> A number of factors can account for this shift: increased dissatisfaction among the working class with liberal elites and establishment conservatives, greater support for populist and rightwing nationalist parties, the fear of changing ethnic demographics, the perception that existing systems of government exclude large swathes of the population, and so on. But whatever the reasons, the inevitable result of increased societal polarization is that democratic states become increasingly more difficult to govern, such that “consensus and political power-sharing among all parties becomes impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

The primary aim of this thesis is to explore what influences governability in polarized societies; specifically, why democratic leaders move from moderation to intransigence on policy proposals. It argues that there are two main factors making for un-governability in polarized societies. The first is the constraint placed on leaders’ choices by the force of public opinion, which precludes those leaders from compromising with one another.<sup>3</sup> Public opinion alone is not sufficient to explain this dynamic, however, as public opinion remains largely stable in the

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<sup>1</sup> The election of Emmanuel Macron to the presidency of France is clearly the countertrend to this assertion.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Cunningham and Sean Byrne, “Peacebuilding in Belfast: Urban Governance in Polarized Societies,” *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2006, p. 45, [www.jstor.org/stable/20753517](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20753517).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that while public opinion is one of the driving forces behind the constraint of leaders’ choices, the reasons for those constraints differ for the leader of the government and the leader of the opposition.

medium to long term while the actions and preferences of leaders can change drastically in the short term. Consequently, while public opinion is the underlying condition that sets parameters from which politicians would be wise not to stray, the second and at times more compelling factor is how public opinion is refracted through the internal dynamics of political coalitions and, by extension, how politicians manipulate public opinion to suit their own purposes.

To demonstrate the validity of the above arguments, I will analyze an issue that has once again entered the political limelight thanks in part to the Trump administration: the political polarization in, and dubious governability of, modern Israel. More specifically, I will examine two separate cases in which public opinion interacted with coalition dynamics to constrain the ability of leaders to govern through compromise – one each for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas. Netanyahu’s case study revolves around his capitulation to more extreme elements within his governing coalition that sought to pass a bill to seize Palestinian land and deny those Palestinians the right to claim ownership until a diplomatic solution was reached regarding the status of the territories;<sup>4</sup> for Abbas, I will analyze his most recent attempt to formalize a relationship between his party, Fatah, and his primary opposition, Hamas. Of importance to the latter case are the recent Fatah-inspired electricity cuts and the withholding of pay to Palestinian Authority employees within the Gaza Strip that refuse to stop working under Hamas’ rule.

### *Public Opinion and Coalition Dynamics*

As part of this analysis it is important to first define what public opinion means for Abbas and Netanyahu. For Abbas, a more traditional definition of public opinion seems appropriate; that is,

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<sup>4</sup> Allison Kaplan Sommer, “Explained: Israeli’s New Palestinian Land-grab Law and Why It Matters,” *Haaretz*, 7 February 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.770102>.

public opinion represents the thinking and desires of the public on a particular issue or issues.

However, due to the salience of certain issues to the Palestinian public, we must also consider the idea, developed by sociologist Herbert Blumer, that public opinion is a form of “collective behavior.”<sup>5</sup> By this definition, there is not one public but several, each manifesting itself whenever a particular issue arises and disappearing when that issue is resolved. As I will demonstrate later in this thesis, Abbas is much more susceptible to the forces of public opinion than his Israeli counterpart. Because I cannot say with much certainty to what Abbas looks for inspiration in his policy formulation, I make the assumption that there is some linkage between documented public opinion data and Abbas’ actions.

As for Netanyahu, public opinion is less easily defined. Certainly, there is a significant amount of public opinion data displaying both Palestinian and Israeli attitudes towards Netanyahu and his policies. However, if we accept the definition of public opinion in Abbas’ context, I argue that public attitudes reflected in polling data are relatively inconsequential in terms of how Netanyahu formulates policy. Thus, we must define public opinion in Netanyahu’s case by how it is refracted through coalition dynamics, which is to say, broadly, how the Israeli public determines the composition of its own government.

A correlate mechanism<sup>6</sup> for the refraction of public opinion through the dynamics of political coalitions can be seen in the electoral procedures of the Israeli Knesset and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The Knesset uses the “closed-list” method of party-list proportional representation, meaning that Israeli citizens vote for their preferred party rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Blumer, “Collective Behavior,” in A.M. Lee, ed., *Principles of Sociology*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1951, 67-121.

<sup>6</sup> I do not argue that there is a strict causal mechanism at play here, i.e., that public opinion directly influences coalition dynamics, or vice versa. There is, however, some interplay between the two, but this is manifested in different ways for Netanyahu and Abbas as will be seen further on in this thesis.

individual candidates. Knesset seats are then given proportionally to each party that receives enough votes to exceed the electoral threshold of 4% of the vote.<sup>7</sup> In essence, the people have a say, to a certain extent, in who represents them; however, the parties for which the public votes determine the party's composition, even though the lists detailing party rosters are published in advance of the vote. Consequently, the internal dynamics of those parties and the coalitions they form proves more significant to the arguments of this thesis. Conversely, elections in the Palestinian Authority (PA) are done within the framework of the Oslo Accords, which limits the power of the PNA in accordance with the Oslo Interim Agreement.<sup>8</sup> Following the elections of 2006 that saw conflict erupt between Fatah and Hamas, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah unilaterally changed the electoral laws established in 2005. This changed the Palestinian electoral system from being half proportionally elected and half constituency-based to full proportional representation. The move was widely seen as an attempt to limit Hamas' success in the next election. The repercussions of such policies on Abbas' public image will be discussed later in this thesis.

Public opinion and coalition dynamics have worked to limit the ability of Abbas and Netanyahu to compromise in the pursuit of conflict resolution with one another; a dynamic that is sought through different patterns of coalition politics in the two cases examined in this thesis. Both men seek to defend themselves from being outflanked by more extreme elements in their governing coalitions, but they chose different governance rules for cementing their leadership. Netanyahu was forced from a position of moderation by one of the far-right members of his coalition, Jewish Home, regarding the passing of the new "Regularization Law" that allows

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<sup>7</sup> Eben Kaplan and Carline Friedman, "Israel's Political System," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 February 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/israels-political-system>.

<sup>8</sup> ProCon.org, *1995 Oslo Interim Agreement*, 28 September 1995, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3de5ebbc0.pdf>.

Israel to “expropriate private Palestinian land within the West Bank where Israeli settlements or outposts have [already] been built.” The move was a departure from Netanyahu’s earlier attempt to delay voting on the law until meeting with the Trump administration on 15 February, though comports with the actions of one desperate to ensure their political survival.<sup>9</sup> Abbas, consequently, has recently made a perplexing move that will no doubt draw the ire of his Israeli counterparts. As of 18 January, Abbas’ party Fatah, the once-dominant force within the Palestinian Authority, has agreed to form a unity government with one of the most extreme groups within the Palestinian government: Hamas. By seeking a formal relationship with his main political rival, Abbas may be attempting to curb a rapid decline in both his approval rating and the popularity of his party.<sup>10</sup> More likely, however, Abbas’ pursuit of unity with Hamas demonstrates his eagerness to control the Gaza Strip – which is governed by Hamas – thereby reinforcing his claim to “speak for all Palestinians.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Abbas has gone so far as to cut salaries of civil servants in Gaza who refuse to stop working under Hamas, withholding Israeli fuel, and refusing to continue paying for the electricity Israel supplies to Gaza.<sup>12</sup> In any case, there is little reason to believe that the plan to form a unity government will receive a warmer reaction from Israel than did the Fatah-Hamas deal of 2014, which prompted Netanyahu to suspend “already faltering” peace talks.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the move seems starkly at odds with Abbas’

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<sup>9</sup> Sommer, 7 February 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No (63), 8-11 March 2017, <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/686>.

<sup>11</sup> The New Arab Staff, “Abbas seeks ‘unprecedented’ steps to end Palestinian split,” *The New Arab*, 13 April 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/4/13/abbas-seeks-unprecedented-steps-to-end-palestinian-split>.

<sup>12</sup> Nidal al-Mughrabi, “Abbas Turns Screw on Hamas by Cutting Gaza’s Electricity,” *U.S. News*, 27 April 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-04-27/abbas-turns-screw-on-hamas-by-cutting-gazas-electricity>.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Black, Peter Beaumont, and Dan Roberts, “Israel suspends peace talks with Palestinians after Fatah-Hamas deal,” *The Guardian*, 24 April 2014,

recent calls for peace between Israel and Palestine, though not perhaps with his view of Israel as an obstacle to peace talks.<sup>14</sup>

This paper will be comprised of four different sections. The first will be a brief overview of the history of modern Israel, detailing the historical antecedents relevant to this thesis. Second, I will describe the theoretical frameworks used to analyze the two case studies described later in this paper, in addition to exploring a hypothesis for each case. Third, I will analyze the case studies themselves. And fourth, I will derive conclusions from that analysis.

### **Modern Israel: A Brief Overview**

The State of Israel was born in bloodshed and chaos. Even before its declaration of statehood in May 1948, the area previously known as British Mandate Palestine was plagued by violence from Arabs and Israelis alike. Concerned that rising Jewish immigration would effectively displace the indigenous Palestinian population, and frustrated with the perceived dishonesty of their British overseers, Palestinians lashed out against Jews and Britons alike.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Jewish Irgun and Lehi paramilitary groups combatted both British rule and nascent Arab nationalism in their quest to retake the Jewish homeland following World War II.<sup>16</sup> While there were few instances of cooperation between Arabs and Jews during this period, both groups were

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/middle-east-israel-halts-peace-talks-palestinians>.

<sup>14</sup> Times of Israel Staff and Agencies, "Abbas welcomes UN resolution, calls in Israel to talk peace," *The Times of Israel*, 25 December 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-welcomes-un-resolution-calls-on-israel-to-talk-peace/>.

<sup>15</sup> Mark A. Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994, Print, pp. 147 and 253.

<sup>16</sup> Menachem Begin, *The Revolt*, New York: Nash Pub., 1977, Print, 41 and 60; see also Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, *Jewish Terrorism in Israel*, New York: Columbia UP, 2009, Print, 11.

united in their mutual distrust of a Britain that had made competing promises to each side. The violence became so intense that the British decided to abdicate their colonial holdings in Mandate Palestine and place the Palestinian Question before the newly formed United Nations<sup>17</sup>, effectively paving the way for Israeli independence.<sup>18</sup>

Independence would have its price, however, as the newly declared Israeli state found itself at war with an Arab coalition that included the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. But despite being better equipped than its Israeli opponent, the Arab coalition fell victim to logistical difficulties and a lack of centralized leadership, both of which contributed to an Israeli victory in the first Arab-Israeli war. Apart from the many armistice agreements signed by both antagonists following the war's end – which saw Israel increase its land area in formerly Mandate Palestine west of the Jordan River – one of the most significant results of the war was the displacement of nearly one million Palestinians. The right of return for these refugees has remained one of the most contentious issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Conflict Continues*

The next significant military challenge Israel met following the first Arab-Israeli War was the Six Day War of 1967. Tensions between Arabs and Israelis had simmered since the Arab defeat in 1948, and came to a head in the summer of 1967. In response to Egyptian forces massing in the Sinai Peninsula, Israel launched a series of preemptive strikes against Egypt that all but

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the mandate from the League of Nations was set to expire anyway, but the process was pushed forward by Arab and Jewish terrorist attacks against their British overseers.

<sup>18</sup> Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2008, Print, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ian J. Bickerton and Carla L. Klausner, *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007, Print, 108-114.



destroyed that country's grounded air force. As the name implies, the conflict lasted merely six days, and ended in a stunning victory for Israel. Indeed, despite seeming militarily superior in every way, the Arab forces arrayed against Israel could not match that country's air force or citizen army. Perhaps inevitably, Israel's became significantly larger than it had been at its inception, as it now occupied the Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Of note is one of the diplomatic solutions to the Six Day War: UN Resolution 242, which Bickerton and Klausner term a "masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity." It called upon Israel to relinquish occupied territories (but did not specify which territories), recognized the right of each state in the region to live in peace, and, among other articles, called for a solution to the refugee problem. Despite its lofty aims, 242 lacked the mechanism necessary to be implemented, and has since been relegated to little more than a talking point in peace negotiations.<sup>20</sup>

1973 saw renewed violence between Arabs and Israelis. In October of that year, bolstered by armaments provided by the Soviet Union, a combined force of Egyptians and Syrians attacked Israel. Only with great difficulty did Israel turn the tide, thanks in part to the intervention of the United States, which reasoned that Soviet interference had to be countered if American influence in the region was to continue. A joint Soviet-American ceasefire was proposed and approved by the United Nations in late October 1973, but due to violations by both Arabs and Israelis the hostilities continued. However, two days after the first plan was approved and subsequently failed, both sides accepted a second ceasefire agreement, though Israel clearly emerged as the victor militarily. The consequences of the war for the various antagonists were manifold: the myth of Israeli military invincibility was shattered, and subsequently that country became increasingly dependent upon its American benefactor; while the Arabs had lost the war

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<sup>20</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 163-172.

militarily, they had achieved an important psychological victory and had, to many observers, won the war from a diplomatic standpoint; the Soviet Union's regional influence deteriorated as it lost important bases in Egypt and Syria; and finally, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was strengthened after being recognized as the "sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" by the Arab League of 1974.<sup>21</sup>

### *Divisiveness Escalates*

While the early decades of modern Israel were characterized by several domestic disputes and punctuated by conflicts with other regional powers, in more recent years the aforementioned internal issues between Israelis and Palestinians have taken center stage. In December 1987, an entire generation of Palestinian youth that had grown up under Israeli occupation rose up in what became known as the first *intifada*, or "shaking off." While the seeds of this uprising had been fermenting for years, nurtured by political and economic frustrations and a sense of isolation from their fellow Arabs, the floodgates were opened after an Israeli vehicle ran into a line of cars in Gaza, killing four Palestinians. Poorly armed and organized, Palestinians were disproportionately killed or wounded during the *intifada*, though both sides committed senseless acts of violence.<sup>22</sup> Three years after the beginning of the *intifada*, it had become clear to the Palestinians that the political and diplomatic efforts pursued through armed resistance had largely failed to bring about any change in the policies and behavior of either Israel or Palestine's Arab comrades. Indeed, somewhat vindictively, King Hussein of Jordan renounced his claim to the West Bank after the Arab League's recognition of the PLO forced Jordan to recognize a

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<sup>21</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 194-197.

<sup>22</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 253-268.

Palestinian state independent of Jordan. This effectively ended the support provided by Hussein upon which West Bank residents greatly depended for urban development and the minutia of daily life.<sup>23</sup> However, it is arguable that the Hashemite king was simply bowing to the pressure of the PLO and that group's insistence that maintaining legal and administrative links between the East and West banks would prove deleterious to the Palestinian struggle.<sup>24</sup>

Violence between Israelis and Palestinians erupted again in 2000 following the provocative visit of then Likud leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, a Muslim holy shrine, accompanied by a large retinue of police officers. While Sharon did not venture into the sites held sacred by Muslims, he vowed that Israel would never give up its claim to the Mount. The next day, Palestinians rioted and attacked Israeli soldiers in what became known as the "al-Aqsa Intifada." Significantly more violent than its predecessor, the al-Aqsa intifada resulted in the death of hundreds and the wounding of thousands, mostly Palestinians. After a summit in Cairo, those Arab countries with ties to Israel subsequently cut those ties. In Israel itself, the political situation became increasingly unstable as the government was dissolved in light of upcoming elections. In early 2001 hardliner Ariel Sharon was elected as Prime Minister over Ehud Barak, garnering more than 60% of the votes. The result represented the "collapse of the center" in Israeli politics, demonstrated that Israelis were deeply pessimistic of Palestinians being a faithful partner in peace negotiations, and similarly reaffirmed Palestinian fears that Israel was not serious about ending the conflict.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tessler, 715-736.

<sup>24</sup> John Kifner, "Hussein Surrenders Claims on West Bank to the P.L.O.; U.S. Peace Plan in Jeopardy; Internal Tensions," *The New York Times*, 1 August 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/01/world/hussein-surrenders-claims-west-bank-plo-us-peace-plan-jeopardy-internal-tensions.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 372-377.

### *A Succession of Failures*

There have been numerous attempts to broker peace between Arabs and Israelis generally, and Israelis and Palestinians specifically. One of the first and most significant of these was the 1978 summit hosted at Camp David by former president Jimmy Carter and attended by the late Egyptian president Anwar as-Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. After some initial frustration on the part of President Carter, the respective parties signed two accords whose provisions were manifold. First, a basis for future negotiations between Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and representatives of the Palestinian people was established whose aim was to settle disputes over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Second, a draft proposal of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel provided for a staged withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Sinai Peninsula and a return of that area to Egypt. Finally, Israeli ships would be granted safe passage through the Suez Canal, and the United Nations would oversee the application of the accords' provisions. However, the Camp David Accords, as they came to be known, failed to address either the issue of Jerusalem as a divided capital or the future of the Golan Heights, which Israel had occupied after the 1967 war. Rather, these issues were relegated to final status talks after "confidence building measures" had been put in place.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1990s, Israel and the PLO reached two agreements known as the Oslo Accords. The first of these accords, signed in Washington, D.C. in 1993, resulted in the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO as part of an interim peace agreement. Another significant aspect of the Oslo I Accord was the "Declaration of Principles," which called for the interim self-rule of Palestinians for a fixed period of time, during which Israelis and Palestinians were to negotiate a permanent peace agreement. The Oslo process was a stunning display of fierce enemies putting

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<sup>26</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 218-220.

aside their differences, if only briefly, to recognize each other's existence and work towards peace.<sup>27</sup>

Oslo II, or the Taba Accord, was signed in Taba, Egypt, in 1995. This accord represented the second stage of the peace process, which had begun with the founding of the Palestinian Authority the previous year and was to serve as a preamble to the final status talks that were planned to begin the following year. Under the provisions of the agreement, three areas would be created in the West Bank: Area A, consisting of territory under direct Palestinian control; Area B, territory jointly controlled by both Israelis and Palestinians, and in which Palestinians would be allowed civil and police authority while Israel continued its security responsibilities; and Area C, which would be under the exclusive control of Israel. Part and parcel to this aspect of the agreement was that Israeli troops would redeploy from various cities in Area A and smaller communities in Area B, minimizing the Israeli presence in those areas. Despite being a move in the right direction, misgivings and distrust by both parties increased their respective anxieties, which were only compounded with the assassination of then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish zealot in November 1995.<sup>28</sup>

One of the last major agreements signed between Israelis and Palestinians as part of the Oslo process was the Wye River Memorandum in 1998, so named for the location of its signing: Wye River, Maryland. The talks were doomed from the start, plagued as they were by mutual distrust on both sides. Nonetheless, under great pressure from American mediators, the Memorandum was eventually signed. Similar to Oslo II, the Wye Memorandum called for additional redeployments of troops and land transfers, provided the PLO removed language from its charter calling for the destruction of Israel. However, as had become commonplace in Israeli-

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<sup>27</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 292-298.

<sup>28</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 312-317.

Palestinian negotiations up to this point, and a theme that will be analyzed further in this thesis, extreme elements on both sides resisted the minimal progress the Memorandum represented.<sup>29</sup>

The agreements listed above are certainly not exhaustive vis-à-vis Israeli-Palestinian or Arab-Israeli relations, but they do represent some of the most significant and hopeful events in the relations between them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, peace negotiations in the post-9/11 world have suffered from many of the same setbacks as their predecessors, without enjoying any of the successes those past agreements achieved. Further, the internal political dynamics of the Middle East have become so volatile that the pursuit of peace between Israelis and Palestinians has become almost an afterthought. Indeed, with Middle Eastern states still reconciling themselves to the Arab Spring, and with the rise of ISIS, ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the hot button issue it once was. There are, nevertheless, still hopes by all parties that an agreement can be met. However, those hopes rest on the shoulders of Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, two men who have always seemed destined to oppose one another.

### *New Players, Same Game*

Mahmoud Abbas, who signed the Oslo I Accord for the PLO and briefly served as PLO chairman following the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, became the second president of Palestine in 2005. Abbas' administration has been checked by an impressive array of forces, not the least of which being the internal disputes between Fatah and Hamas, the continued antagonism to and from Israeli leadership, and increasingly dwindling public support for Abbas. This last factor will be returned to and elaborated on below.

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<sup>29</sup> Bickerton and Klausner, 344-348.

Further plaguing Abbas' tenuous grasp on authority are questions of the legitimacy of his presidency by Israelis and Palestinians alike, some of whom claim that he illegally occupies the presidential office in violation of the "Basic Law."<sup>30</sup> Despite Abbas' generally combative rhetoric vis-à-vis Israel, in 2008 he was close, according to an article by The Times of Israel breaking news editor Adiv Sterman, to reaching a peace agreement with then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Nothing finalized came of these negotiations, however, perhaps in part because of Olmert's resignation in the face of corruption allegations.<sup>31</sup> As Abbas' long term in office stretches on, his approval rating dips lower and lower as the majority of Palestinians are dissatisfied with his performance, believe the Palestinian leadership as a whole is either inadequate in its role or else completely negligent, and believe that the standing of Palestine is worse than it was both 10 and 50 years ago. Much of this negative public opinion can also be tied into negative evaluations of conditions within Gaza and the West Bank, in addition to perceptions of safety and security in those areas.<sup>32</sup> Yet, despite mounting calls for his resignation, there is little evidence to suggest the 81-year-old plans to step down.<sup>33</sup> All this considered, Abbas has been and remains a polarizing figure in a system rife with corruption and discontent.

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<sup>30</sup> Ahmad Abu Amer, "Poll: 65% of Palestinians want Abbas out," *Al-Monitor*, 21 June 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/palestine-65-want-abbas-resign-president.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Adiv Sterman, "Abbas was willing to compromise on right of return," *The Times of Israel*, 11 March 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-was-willing-to-compromise-on-right-of-return/>.

<sup>32</sup> Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. (63), *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 26 March 2017, <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/688>.

<sup>33</sup> Jack Moore, "Palestinian Strongman Tipped to Replace Abbas Throws Weight Behind Marwan Barghouti," *Newsweek*, 31 October 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/palestinian-strongman-tipped-replace-abbas-throws-weight-behind-marwan-515385>; it is worth noting that Abbas refuses to step down even despite the maneuvering of exiled official Mohammed Dahlan, the former leader of Fatah in Gaza.

Abbas' Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, the brother of famed Israeli soldier Yonatan Netanyahu, was elected to a fourth three-year term as prime minister in 2015, having previously served in this office from 1996 – 1999 and 2009 – 2015. Netanyahu, like Abbas, has been a polarizing figure both within and outside of Israel. He has faced staunch criticism from liberal Israelis who decry his treatment of Palestine and the rightwing makeup of his coalition, while conservatives and the far right reject any dealings with their Palestinian neighbors. Nevertheless, criticism against Netanyahu has not translated into losing elections. In recent years Netanyahu has vacillated between a hardline stance<sup>34</sup> and willingness to compromise<sup>35</sup> with the Palestinians, though in 2016 he tended towards the former. This can be explained in part by the increasing right-leaning alignment of his governing coalition to which Netanyahu must at times concede lest his fragile coalition fall to pieces. Indeed, the Israeli Prime Minister must perform a certain mental jujitsu to reconcile his professed desire for peace between Israelis and Palestinians while performing inflammatory acts such as the continued building of settlements in the West Bank.

## Case Studies

### *Riker's Size Principle and Knesset Coalition Documents*

Owing to the nature of Netanyahu and his governing coalition, it is necessary to view the case study in which they will be examined through the lens of two separate but related frameworks.

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<sup>34</sup> Jodi Rudoren, "Netanyahu Comments Cast Doubt on Stance Towards Palestinians," *The New York Times*, 8 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/world/netanyahu-comments-cast-doubt-on-stance-toward-palestinians.html?mcubz=0>.

<sup>35</sup> Amir Tibon, "Exclusive: Obama's Detailed Plans for Mideast Peace Revealed – and How Everything Fell Apart," *Haaretz*, 8 June 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.794292>.



The first is the “size principle” espoused by the late William H. Riker. In its most succinct form, Riker’s size principle states:

“... [political] participants create coalitions just as large as they believe will ensure winning and no larger.”<sup>36</sup>

Riker continues by saying that coalitions seek to maximize their size only “up to the point of subjective certainty of winning,” but after that point seek to maintain the size of a minimum winning coalition.<sup>37</sup> This principle runs somewhat contradictory to what will be discussed below vis-à-vis Netanyahu and his government in two major ways: 1) Netanyahu did not seek to create a minimum winning coalition; rather, a minimum winning coalition was all that he was able to put together following the 2015 elections, and 2) related to the first point, Netanyahu actually *increased* the size of his already-winning coalition as of May 2016, thus undermining Riker’s argument that coalitions seek to maintain a minimum winning size and therefore maximize the amount each member of that coalition can expect to win.<sup>38</sup> Utilizing the size principle may then seem counterintuitive given these contradictions; however, it nonetheless remains a useful framework against which to examine the rationale behind the forming of political coalitions, even if the size of those coalitions may erode this specific aspect of Riker’s theory. Such utility is corroborated by O.R. Young, who argues that even if a new member or members is added to an existing coalition, benefits accruing to existing members are not *decreased* and nor are the costs

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<sup>36</sup> William H. Riker, “The Theory of Political Coalitions,” *Yale University Press*, 1962, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Riker, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Rory Jones, “Israel’s Netanyahu Reaches Deal to Expand Ruling Coalition,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/israels-netanyahu-reaches-deal-to-expand-government-coalition-1464164830>.

imposed on them *increased*.<sup>39</sup> As such, the “rational coalition-builder” will necessarily have an interest in expanding the size of his or her coalition<sup>40</sup>, given the attractive benefits and relatively minor costs, especially if he or she places a high estimate on the likelihood of defection from the coalition.<sup>41</sup> When applied to Netanyahu this would necessitate, if borne out in Young’s theory wholesale, minor concessions given by the Prime Minister in exchange for an increase in the size of his governing coalition. Necessarily, this brings us to the second part of my analytical framework; namely, a discussion of the coalition agreements of the Israeli Knesset.

In essence, a coalition agreement is an agreement reached between the various parties that form the cabinet of a multiparty government. In the case of Israel, this process involves negotiations between the Prime Minister and the prospective party or parties with whom he desires to form a coalition. Both the Prime Minister and the prospective coalition members stand to gain by joining together: the Prime Minister increases the size of his governing coalition and thus a greater chance of victory in terms of policy formulation, while the prospective member joins the coalition under the assumption that the issue(s) dearest to them will be a part of the government’s agenda. There is an element of risk for the Prime Minister in this regard, as he may have to make concessions in order to convince a party to join his government; however, because coalition agreements are considered binding by Israeli law, a party joining said coalition must adhere to the agreements reached with the Prime Minister at the time of the coalition’s

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<sup>39</sup> O.R. Young, “Rationality, coalition formation, and international relations,” in S.I. Benn and G.W. Mortimore, eds., *Rationality and the Social Sciences (RLE Social Theory): Contributions to the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Routledge, 2014, 238-40.

<sup>40</sup> To what extent Young does not specify.

<sup>41</sup> However, Young cautions that even given these conditions, individual members may be reluctant to join such a coalition as by abstaining he or she may enjoy the collective good engendered by the coalition without being required to contribute to it. It remains to be seen whether this latter point is evident within Netanyahu’s Knesset.

formation.<sup>42</sup> In any case, concessions may be a necessary risk for the Prime Minister, for if he is not able to form a coalition government by the established deadline, the President would then offer to another party the chance to form a government.

The specific agreements of Netanyahu's coalition will be elaborated below, as will their influence on the dynamics of Netanyahu's government and, by extension, Netanyahu himself. It must suffice for now to say that the agreement between Netanyahu and orthodox-nationalist party Jewish Home, particularly the provision granting control of the World Zionist Organization's Settlement Division (and by extension the implementation of the aforementioned "Regularization Law"), obliged Netanyahu to abandon moderation on this crucial issue for fear of losing supporters to the leader of Jewish Home, Naftali Bennett.

### *Palestinian Public Opinion and its Effect on Policy*

A paper by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1983) concluded that often public opinion is a "proximate cause" of policy. And while their study focused on democratic responsiveness in American politics, some of their findings present compelling implications for the relationship between public opinion and domestic policy within Palestine. Perhaps chief amongst these is the notion that often public opinion changes before policy, and in such an instance it is reasonable to assume that "policy has not affected opinion." This thesis argues that while Abbas' policies have often remained relatively immutable in the face of increasingly negative public views of his administration, of prospects for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more generally of Palestine's relationship with Israel, his move towards a formal relationship

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<sup>42</sup> Times of Israel Staff, "Bennett rejects US comments on 'Jewish state' bill," 25 November 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-rejects-us-comments-on-jewish-state-bill/>.

with Hamas displays an appreciation of Palestinian public opinion vis-à-vis relatively equal public support for both Hamas and Fatah.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to note that much of the literature regarding the effect of public opinion on policy relates primarily to liberal democracies. To be sure, there have been studies that have sought to allay this deficiency by examining data on Palestinian attitudes toward democracy, but they have focused primarily on attitudes that relate to the compatibility between democracy and Islam.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a study by Khalil Shikaki (1996) measures public attitudes towards democracy and democratic values; however, Shikaki's data was derived from surveys taken from August-September 1995 and, therefore, are not an accurate reflection of contemporary Palestinian public opinion.<sup>45</sup> Given such a limitation, this thesis will rely exclusively upon data curated between 2007 – 2017 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in its analysis of Abbas.

It is also important to keep in mind that within Palestinian public opinion data, *salience* of public opinion on an issue is significant. That is to say, as Bromley-Trujillo et al. argue, when an issue is important to the public at large, the extent to which the government responds to the issue “increases with that issue’s salience.”<sup>46</sup> As is sometimes the case, a small but vocal (and at

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, “Effects of Public Opinion on Policy,” *The American Political Science Review*, American Political Science Association, 77:1, (1983), 185-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1956018>.

<sup>44</sup> Audra K. Grant and Mark A. Tessler, “Palestinian Attitudes Toward Democracy and its Compatibility with Islam: Evidence from Public Opinion Research in the West Bank and Gaza,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 24:4 (2002), 1-20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858422>.

<sup>45</sup> Khalil Shikaki, “The Peace Process, National Reconstruction, and the Transition to Democracy in Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 25:2 (1996), 5-20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538180>.

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca Bromley-Trujillo, Jordan Leising, and John Poe, “The Importance of Salience: Public Opinion and State Policy Action on Climate Change,” *University of Kentucky*, prepared for presentation 15-18 May 2014, <http://sppc2014.indiana.edu/Papers/Bromley-Trujillo%20et%20al.pdf>.

times jingoistic) minority drives the salience of a particular issue. In the Palestinian context, this is evidenced by the calls of some extremists for the total destruction of Israel, and is mirrored in the demands for the deportation (or annihilation) of Palestinians by similarly extreme elements in Israeli society. Therefore, it is not entirely accurate to claim that public opinion is a proximate cause of policy; instead, the greater the salience of an issue, the greater its effect on policy. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Palestine. Indeed, public opinion does not itself determine Israeli policy; rather, the potential *influence* of public opinion is stronger with increased salience of an issue.

### *Hypotheses*

A number of potential hypotheses may be formulated from the above case studies. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen two whose plausibility will be explored rather than systematically tested:

*1. If Netanyahu continues to be constrained by the extreme right-wing elements of his governing coalition, he will continue ceding to the demands of those elements in order to stay in power and thus alienate less fanatical voices in the Knesset.*

*2. If Abbas believes the tide of public opinion to be turning against him, he will attempt to manipulate public opinion in order maintain his tenuous grasp on the Palestinian Authority.*

## **The Leaning Tower: Netanyahu's Pivot to the Far Right**

### *Strange bedfellows*

In order to precisely analyze the relationship between public opinion and the coalition dynamics of Benjamin Netanyahu's government, it is important to first briefly describe how exactly that government was formed. Following an antagonistic campaign during which he accused his political rivals of conspiring against him, promised to never allow the creation of a Palestinian state if reelected, and complained about Israeli-Arabs exercising their right to vote, Netanyahu and his Likud party achieved a "crushing" victory in the Knesset elections of March 2015.<sup>47</sup> Two months later, allegedly with just an hour to spare, Netanyahu succeeded in forming a majority government, albeit with only the minimum number of parliamentary seats required.<sup>48</sup> Among the more notable members of Netanyahu's nascent coalition circa 2015 were the "hard-right pro-settlement" Jewish Home and the ultra-orthodox Shas party.<sup>49</sup> In the same agreement, Netanyahu reinforced his coalition with the controversial appointment of Avigdor Lieberman to the post of Defense Minister. The appointment of Lieberman, the ultranationalist leader of the Yisrael Beitenu party who demanded a law giving the death penalty to terrorists and explicitly supported the Israeli soldier who executed a wounded Palestinian, drew the ire of both Netanyahu's

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<sup>47</sup> Times of Israel Staff and AP, "Netanyahu scores crushing victory in Israeli elections," *The Times of Israel*, 18 March 2015 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-claims-victory-as-vote-count-shows-likud-further-ahead/>; see also Jodi Rudoren, "Netanyahu Says No to Statehood for Palestinians," *The New York Times*, 16 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/17/world/middleeast/benjamin-netanyahu-campaign-settlement.html>; and Isabel Kershner, "Deep Wounds and Lingering Questions After Israel's Bitter Race," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/middleeast/netanyahu-israel-elections-arabs.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Oren Liebermann, "Benjamin Netanyahu forms a coalition government for Israel," *CNN*, 6 May 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/06/middleeast/israel-election-coalition/>.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Beaumont, "Binyamin Netanyahu bids to form rightwing Israeli coalition after decisive win," *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/18/israel-election-bibi-victory-binyamin-netanyahu>.

opposition and some members of his own party. Netanyahu's more practical impetus for bringing Lieberman and his party into the governing coalition was simply to increase the coalition's size from 61 to 67 seats<sup>50</sup>, six seats more than a bare majority.<sup>51</sup> And while ostensibly Lieberman's addition may represent a further pivot to the right on the part of Netanyahu's coalition, some have argued that the statements and actions for which Lieberman had become infamous prior to his appointment have not affected his behavior in office.<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned above, the Knesset's coalition agreements are an integral aspect of both the relationship between the parties within the coalition and the policies the coalition pursues. Further, because the agreement is legally binding, parties that join the coalition must adhere to the agreements made with the Prime Minister; however, the Prime Minister must at times cede politically to some of the demands of the prospective members in order to secure their presence within his coalition. For example, mere weeks before the deadline to form a government, Netanyahu signed agreements with the first partners that would eventually make up his coalition: the centrist Kulanu and ultra-orthodox United Torah Judaism (UTJ) parties. To Kulanu, Netanyahu and Likud promised an increase in the salary of IDF soldiers, unemployment insurance to self-employed workers, and finalization of a biennial budget by October 2015. In addition, Kulanu was given control of finance, environmental protection, and housing portfolios,

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<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Lis and Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Offers Defense Post, Dumps Herzog in Shock Move," *Haaretz*, 19 May 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.720355>; it should be noted that Lieberman's appointment came at the cost of Isaac Herzog, leader of the Zionist Union, who had been in negotiations with Netanyahu to bring that group into the Prime Minister's government.

<sup>51</sup> Here we see some evidence for Young's assertion that it is actually in the interests of a coalition builder to increase the size of his or her coalition. This is particularly true in the case of Netanyahu, who sacrificed relatively little at the time in deepening an already staunchly right-leaning government. This move does not necessarily invalidate Riker's theory, but it does draw into question some of its assumptions.

<sup>52</sup> Neri Zibler, "Israel's 'Fascist' Defense Minister Is a Pragmatist," *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2016.

as well as control over the Israel Land Administration. The deal with UTJ was far more controversial. In order to secure UTJ's entry into his coalition, Netanyahu promised to roll back several reforms passed by the previous government. Among them was a cutback in child allowances to families based upon the number of children in the family and their annual family income, and to cuts to Israel's state-run ultra-orthodox educational system. UTJ also gained control of the Health and Education ministries, and the Knesset Finance and Science and Space committees. Yair Lapid, leader of the centrist Yesh Atid party, decried the deal with UTJ as "[selling] the values of equality," referring specifically to Netanyahu's further concession that struck down criminal penalties for draft dodgers.<sup>53</sup>

It is Netanyahu's deal with Jewish Home, however, which is of primary concern to this particular case study. Perhaps because Jewish Home was the final piece Netanyahu required to form a government (indeed, the deal between the two parties was reached just hours before the established deadline), the Prime Minister was compelled to offer significant concessions. Under the terms of the deal, Jewish Home was made a number of generous promises: the right to name a deputy defense minister; control of the Knesset's Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee; an agreement to push a controversial bill that limited foreign funding for NGOs operating within Israel that were deemed "hostile" to that country, and of which Palestinians were the principal beneficiaries; increased protection for transportation over the Green Line<sup>54</sup>; and control over the

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<sup>53</sup> Times of Israel Staff and Daniel Bernstein, "Securing first partners, Likud inks coalition deals with Kulanu, UTJ," *The Times of Israel*, 29 April 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/securing-first-partners-likud-inks-coalition-deals-with-kulanu-utj/>.

<sup>54</sup> The Green Line, or the pre-1967 border, is a demarcation line set up following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War that served as the de facto border between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The Green Line became militarily irrelevant following the Six Day War of 1967, and Israeli settlements constructed beyond the line remain an issue to this day.



Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization.<sup>55</sup> It is this last concession that may prove the most significant, for the Settlement Division – an external body that allows the Israeli government to avoid direct responsibility for settlement issues – is tasked with implementing government decisions in the settlement sphere. As such, the division’s operations, and Jewish Home’s control of those operations, are relevant to the following case study.<sup>56</sup>

*“This whole land is ours. All of it.”*

Passed in a late night vote in February 2017, the euphemistically named Regularization Law garnered predictable reactions from both sides of the political spectrum. Right-wing groups praised the bill’s passage as a “historic step ... toward the application of full Israeli sovereignty” and, according to Naftali Bennett, “[a] revolution.” Conversely, Israeli NGOs such as Peace Now immediately vowed to appeal to the Israeli High Court of Justice against the law, while Knesset opposition leader Isaac Herzog called the legislation “de facto annexation” and warned against the potential repercussions of the bill’s passage.<sup>57</sup>

In what may best be described as a nimble display of political face-saving, Netanyahu, who had previously opposed the regularization law, was forced to give the bill his blessing lest he draw the ire of coalition member Jewish Home. All this while the Attorney General of Netanyahu’s own government, Avichai Mendelblit, refused to either endorse or defend the law

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<sup>55</sup> Times of Israel Staff, “Jewish Home makes it official with Likud deal,” *The Times of Israel*, 7 May 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-home-makes-it-official-with-likud-deal/>.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Hattis Rolef, “Think About It: The Status of the WZO Settlement Division,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 January 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Think-about-it-The-status-of-the-WZO-Settlement-Division-439261>.

<sup>57</sup> Tovah Lazaroff, Udi Shaham, and Gil Hoffman, “Knesset Passes Historic Law Legalizing 4,000 Settler Homes,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 February 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Knesset-passes-historic-Settlements-Bill-480768>.

should it be challenged in the High Court. Bad optics notwithstanding, the spectacle is most immediately an indictment of Netanyahu's weakness domestically and, as put by *The Economist*, demonstrative of how Netanyahu is increasingly "at the mercy" of the most extreme elements in his coalition. That the law was stayed in March 2017 at Mendelblit's recommendation takes nothing from the argument that Netanyahu caved to right-wing pressure in order to ensure his political survival. If anything, it is a further indictment of Netanyahu's weakening domestic position. Furthermore, were Netanyahu to lose the support of Jewish Home by failing to capitulate to that group's demands, and were Jewish Home to then leave the government, Netanyahu would lose eight parliamentary seats in his governing coalition. This would place the total size of his coalition at 59, two short of the number of seats required to form a minimum-winning coalition. This would no doubt spell disaster for Netanyahu and might presage the death knell of his administration.<sup>58</sup>

While we cannot peer into Netanyahu's head, it is not a stretch to say that he might secretly hope the Israeli High Court will throw out the law for two reasons. First, putting to bed such controversial legislation will eliminate one item on Netanyahu's growing list of domestic vulnerabilities. Second, even if the bill were to be struck down, his support of its passage (and the work he did to whip up support for it) would allow him to save face with Jewish Home. This may not be enough to satiate Netanyahu's far-right partners; indeed, as of February 2017 Jewish Home had "demanded legislation to annex ... a suburb of 40,000 to the east of Jerusalem" into

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<sup>58</sup> *The Economist*, "A land-grab in the West Bank: Israel's parliament passes a controversial 'regulation' bill on settlements," *The Economist*, 7 February 2017, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21716563-high-court-may-yet-strike-it-down-israels-parliament-passes-controversial>.

Israel proper. Needless to say, doing so would undoubtedly draw the ire of Palestinians and left-wing Israelis alike.<sup>59</sup>

Netanyahu's support of the Regularization Bill, and his handling of the settlement issue in general, certainly does not gel with his professed desire for peace with the Palestinians. This is especially true when one considers how divisive the settlement issue has been throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We must question his sincerity when claiming in May 2017 to see "real hope for change,"<sup>60</sup> when just four months earlier he derided a Mideast peace conference held in Paris as "useless."<sup>61</sup> One can be forgiven, then, for experiencing a sort of cognitive dissonance when attempting to decipher Netanyahu's intentions: does he truly desire peace, or is he guided simply by his own personal brand of realpolitik? His pronouncements often tend towards the former, while his actions suggest the latter; and, with the ever-increasing list of issues plaguing Netanyahu at home there is little reason to suspect that going forward he will act out of anything more than self-preservation. It should be troubling to both the Palestinians and their leaders, who have long suffered the tired refrain of being referred to as "not partners in peace," that the head of the Israeli government is either unwilling, or unable, to pursue peace beyond the realm of florid proclamations. However, as will be discussed below, Netanyahu's Palestinian counterpart has his own vast array of impediments that serve to obstruct the road to peace.

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<sup>59</sup> The Economist, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Ali Vitali, "Trump, Netanyahu Vow to Pursue Mideast Peace, Confront Iran," *NBC News*, 22 May 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/trump-s-first-foreign-trip/donald-trump-arrives-israel-will-push-peace-process-n762816>.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre-Elliot Buet, Elliott C. McLaughlin, James Masters, and Oren Lieberman, "Netanyahu: Paris peace conference is 'useless'," *CNN*, 15 January 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/15/middleeast/paris-peace-conference-israeli-palestinian-conflict/index.html>.

## **A Faustian Bargain?: Abbas Seeks a Formal Relationship with Hamas (Again)**

*“A million shahids”*

Mahmoud Abbas’ presidency was doomed from the start. Deemed by some to be the natural successor to the late Yasser Arafat after Arafat’s death in 2004, Abbas assumed the presidency of the PNA in 2005 after a contentious and controversial election. Challenges to his nascent administration were almost immediate: on 12 January 2005 Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched a raid in Gaza that killed one and wounded three Israeli soldiers; the next day, a combined force consisting of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, Hamas, and the Popular Resistance Committees launched a suicide attack that killed six Israelis.

The conflict between Abbas and Hamas escalated after Fatah lost the parliamentary elections of 2006 to Hamas, led then by Ismail Haniyeh. Haniyeh formed a government comprised primarily of Hamas members, which Fatah refused to join and which aroused the ire of both the United States and Israel. Tensions between Fatah and Hamas simmered throughout 2006 as some Palestinian officials affiliated with Fatah refused to take orders from the Hamas-led government, and both parties were unable to reach a deal to share power. Then, in February 2007, Fatah and Hamas signed a deal to form a national unity government; the agreement was implemented the following month.<sup>62</sup>

The unity government failed to address many of the prevailing issues within Palestine, particularly within Gaza, and so violence erupted between Fatah and Hamas. This renewed spate of brutality culminated in the so-called Battle of Gaza, which saw Hamas take control of the Gaza Strip, effectively splitting the Palestinian Territories politically where they were already

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<sup>62</sup> Hisham Abu Taha and Mohammed Mari’i, “Palestinians OK Unity Govt,” *Arab News*, 18 March 2007, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/296042>.

separated territorially. In response, Abbas dissolved the government, declared a state of emergency within Palestine, dismissed then Prime Minister Haniyeh, and installed then Finance Minister Salam Fayyad in Haniyeh's place. While Haniyeh's dismissal from government fell within the purview of Abbas' authority, experts in Palestinian law and some members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) questioned Fayyad's ascent to power. They argue that Abbas' actions are a violation of the Basic Law, and thus question the legality of Fayyad's government.<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that despite Abbas' dubious conduct in the summer of 2007, the majority of Palestinians polled following Hamas' seizure of Gaza (56%) supported the emergency declaration and would have favored Fatah to Hamas (43% to 33%, respectively), had a parliamentary election been held immediately after the Gaza crisis.<sup>64</sup>

*If at first we don't succeed...*

While Abbas' first attempt at political reconciliation with Hamas serves as the bedrock for this case study, it is his most recent endeavor to bridge both the political and geographical gap between Gaza and the West Bank that is of primary interest. It was announced after a three-day negotiation in January 2017 that Fatah and Hamas would form a new National Council, which

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<sup>63</sup> Under Palestinian Basic Law, the President can dismiss the Prime Minister; however, the government of the dismissed Prime Minister continues to function until a new government is formed that receives a vote of confidence from an absolute majority of the PLC. Hamas, which holds a majority within the PLC, never met to confirm the Fayyad government; See Adam Entous, "Framers of Palestinian constitution challenge Abbas," *Reuters*, 8 July 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-law-idUSL0824203920070708>.

<sup>64</sup> Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. (24), *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 14-20 June 2007, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/231>; it is also worth noting that within the same poll, the majority of Palestinians (59%) believed Fatah and Hamas were equally responsible for the infighting, and that the dissatisfaction with the performance of Abbas and Haniyeh reached 84% and 74%, respectively.

would include Palestinians in exile, and which would subsequently hold elections.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, little has come of the announced unity government, and its implementation has been hampered by changes in leadership on both sides. In particular, Hamas' installation of Yahya Sinwar as deputy leader could prove a costly mistake, considering he is thought by some to be far more militant than his predecessor, and thus represents a distinct turn from moderation.<sup>66</sup>

Nonetheless, pursuing a unity government with Hamas is certainly a shrewd political move on Abbas' part, given his waning domestic support. Indeed, a PCPSR poll dated March 2017 found roughly two-thirds of Palestinians believed Abbas should resign<sup>67</sup>, and little over a third of Palestinians would support Abbas' party in parliamentary elections. Even more strikingly, less than a third of those polled were optimistic about the reconciliation of Hamas and Fatah and even fewer were satisfied with the performance of the reconciliation government.<sup>68</sup>

All this considered it is little wonder Abbas has decided to pursue reconciliation with his chief political rival in an attempt to shore up his domestic position. However, cozening up to a militant group that has in the past called for Israel's destruction will certainly not play well with that country's leaders, unless of course they are of the right-wing ilk that use such rhetoric as a pretense to further an aggressive settlement policy. In such a case Abbas' move seems all the more perplexing given what we have already discussed vis-à-vis certain elements of the Israeli government. However, his actions are likely geared towards short-term political survival and the

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<sup>65</sup> Ali Younes, "Fatah and Hamas to form unity government," *Al Jazeera*, 18 January 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/fatah-hamas-form-unity-government-170118031339203.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Stratfor Assessments, "Hamas and Fatah: In Transition but No Less Divided," *Stratfor*, 23 February 2017, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/hamas-and-fatah-transition-no-less-divided>.

<sup>67</sup> It should be noted, however, that had presidential elections occurred the same day as the poll, Abbas would have received the same amount of support (47%) as Ismail Haniyeh.

<sup>68</sup> Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No (63), 8-11 March 2017.

improvement of his domestic image rather than an indication of a long-term, in-depth strategy for peace.

A more direct explanation is that Abbas realizes how toxic a partner is Hamas, and that the defter political move would be to manipulate public opinion in Gaza in his favor. Toward that end, in April the Palestinian President announced that he would take “unprecedented steps” to end the division between the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>69</sup> While he did not immediately explain what those steps would be, they became clear soon enough. The first was to impose a drastic 30% salary reduction upon Palestinian Authority private sector workers in Gaza. The PA instructed its employees within Gaza not to work while Hamas remained in power, and kept those on the payroll who obliged the PA’s instructions. However, many continued to do their jobs in light of a religious decree that said it was immoral to accept money without having earned it. A spokesperson for the PA blamed the salary cuts upon the financial blockade imposed upon Palestine, but it is difficult to see the PA’s actions as anything less than punitive measures intended to pressure Hamas.<sup>70</sup> The second, and more troubling, measure Abbas levied against Gaza was to request Israel to reduce the amount of electricity supplied to Hamas’ increasingly isolated stronghold. Considering Gazans receive only four hours of electricity per day as it is, further reducing the supply will serve only to worsen the humanitarian crisis within Gaza and to exacerbate the divide between Hamas and the PA. For one such as Abbas, who polls atrociously within Gaza yet may in fact need the support of Gazans generally and Hamas specifically to forestall his exodus from power, doling out such punishment is both shortsighted and cruel. The

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<sup>69</sup> The New Arab, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Isra Namey, “Gaza pay cuts deepen rift between PA and Hamas,” *Al Jazeera*, 11 April 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/gaza-pay-cuts-deepen-rift-pa-hamas-170410101939251.html>.

title of this section then becomes ambiguous, as it is unclear whether Abbas or Hamas is the devil with whom a bargain is struck.<sup>71</sup>

Abbas' actions towards Gaza, and specifically Hamas, may simply be a response to that group's presentation of a more "moderate public face" prior to Abbas' scheduled meeting with President Trump. In a document released just before that meeting, Hamas "watered down" the anti-Semitic language in its charter – though stopped short of formally recognizing Israel – and accepted a provisional Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. However, this posturing may too have been a display intended more for a domestic audience than anything else, for while Hamas' declarations suggest a move towards moderation, their goals remain more or less unchanged. Regardless, a "moderated" Hamas presents a stark challenge to the credibility of Abbas' controversial administration and his claim to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people.<sup>72</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Based on the case studies examined above, it is clear that the forces of public opinion and coalition dynamics significantly hamper the ability of Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu to govern and, by extension, to compromise with one another. However, these forces act upon each leader in different ways and to varying degrees. It is certainly the case that much

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<sup>71</sup> Raf Sanchez, "Israel cuts Gaza electricity after Palestinian president says he will no longer pay the bill for Hamas," *The Telegraph*, 12 June 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/12/israel-cuts-gaza-electricity-palestinian-president-says-will/>.

<sup>72</sup> Ian Fisher, "In Palestinian Power Struggle, Hamas Moderates Talk on Israel," *The New York Times*, 1 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/01/world/middleeast/hamas-fatah-palestinians-document.html?mcubz=0>.



of Netanyahu's policies are a reaction to internal pressures within his governing coalition.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the combination of volatile domestic politics and investigations into alleged impropriety on Netanyahu's part has served only to weaken his position within Israel. Despite these issues, and his decreasing approval rating, Netanyahu's coalition is holding together. Nonetheless, the stage is set for one of Netanyahu's rivals, Naftali Bennett for instance, to challenge the Prime Minister's leadership by withdrawing from the governing coalition and thus spelling the doom of Netanyahu's administration.

Paradoxically, Abbas provides evidence both for and against the hypothesis associated with his case study. Pursuing a formal relationship with Hamas demonstrates Abbas' understanding – or appreciation – of Palestinian public opinion, in that by attempting to bring Hamas back into the fold he would no doubt enjoy a boost to his public image. Conversely, Abbas somewhat falsifies the hypothesis, given his professed desire to unify with Hamas contrasted with his subsequent treatment of Gaza. However, this can be attributed in part to the fear of what effect an ostensibly “moderating” Hamas might have on public opinion, on the credibility of Abbas' administration, and on prospects for negotiation with Israel. Thus, while we can say that issue salience is certainly a factor when gauging public opinion, it is unclear to what extent this applies to Abbas, given his sometimes-erratic behavior compared to relatively stable public opinion levels. What seems more likely is that Abbas recognizes Hamas as a toxic partner, and instead of trying to marry himself to that toxicity he instead seeks to undermine his rival in Gaza.

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<sup>73</sup> His most recent capitulation to ultra-Orthodox parties regarding the establishment of an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, as an example; see Haaretz Editorial, “Netanyahu's Surrender to Israel's ultra-Orthodox Parties,” *Haaretz*, 28 June 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/1.798147>.

What can be said unequivocally is that there is a baser impetus for the abandonment of moderation by Abbas and Netanyahu, one that has proven far more powerful than either political dynamics or public opinion: the desire to survive. When one looks beyond the rhetoric, it becomes clear that, more than anything, each man simply desires to maintain his position of authority, and will do whatever is in his power to do so. The dictates of conscience easily fall to the wayside of the primal need to maintain and exert power over others. I do not suggest that Abbas and Netanyahu have no redeemable qualities between them, for of course they do. Nor do I suggest that the desire to ensure political survival is exclusive to these leaders. However, it is these leaders who are the foci of this thesis, therefore all things must be laid bare as I have observed them. And it has become clear in researching this thesis that the main hypotheses failed to account for what should have been obvious from the beginning: Abbas and Netanyahu are only human, and thus can their desire for power be humanized, transient though that power may be.

There is, however, an ancillary factor that influences governability in modern Israel that came to light during the research for this paper, which was not accounted for in the hypotheses formulated above; namely, the influence of the Trump administration. Surely, most had envisioned Trump and Netanyahu fostering a close political partnership and, indeed, it appeared initially that this would be the case. However, Trump's lukewarm support for Netanyahu's policies, particularly regarding the construction of new settlements and the status of those that already exist, must incite no small amount of panic in the heart of the Israeli Prime Minister.<sup>74</sup> Regardless, it will be interesting to see how this relationship plays out for the remainder of either

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<sup>74</sup> NPR Staff, "Transcript and Analysis: Trump And Netanyahu Hold Joint Press Conference," *NPR*, 15 February 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/15/514986341/watch-live-trump-netanyahu-hold-joint-press-conference-at-white-house>.

leader's term(s). Similarly, Abbas seems to have placed at least some of his hopes upon the shoulders of the Trump administration, though Trump's initial appraisal of the Palestinian leader could hardly have been considered generous. This is not to suggest that Abbas will not find a potential partner in Trump; however, the Trump-Abbas meeting in May seems to have accomplished little beyond the expository rhetoric all too familiar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only time will tell. Given the general volatility of the Middle East, however, and the various crises occurring in Palestine and beyond, time is certainly at a premium. And when the maintenance of power takes precedence of the will and welfare of the people that power is intended to protect, there is little reason to feel optimistic about the future.

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